
Quarterly Report October – December 2014

IRTOUN “Rise Again”

Funded by USAID / Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA)
and
USAID / Food For Peace (FFP)



Picture - A Village Savings and Lending Association in Ouattagouna, photo by Abdramane Issa, Mercy Corps

1. Executive Summary

With the support of USAID’s Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA) and Food for Peace (FFP), Mercy Corps’ Irtoun program offers a package of integrated activities designed to enhance food security and economic resilience of communities recovering from the effects of conflict in Ansongo, Northern Mali. In the fourth quarter of FY14, the program is on track to achieve or exceed its objectives per its implementation plan. Mercy Corps continues to coordinate with local stakeholders and technical agencies of the government of Mali to ensure that the program is in line with local needs and helping to facilitate a clear path for recovery.

During the reporting period, the program achieved the following:

- Trainings to 180 pastoralists and agro-pastoralists on fodder harvesting techniques;
- Awareness campaigns on fodder management held with 1,200 people
- Distribution and installation of solar refrigerators in 2 communes (Ansongo and Ouattagouna)
- Distribution of agricultural inputs (seeds and tools) to 1,200 farmers through vouchers in November
- Support to 50 community vegetable gardens for farmer training of best agricultural practices
- 2 distributions of VFW vouchers for 1,200 households in October and November (35,000 FCFA value per household).
- Completed infrastructure rehabilitation of 75 sites, resulting to date in 24.74 kilometers rehabilitated
- Cash transfers and support to 75 projects for micro-entrepreneur support, as well as financial literacy and marketing training
- 87 VSLAs fully functional (2,266 beneficiaries) and training conducted;
- Mercy Corps has reached to date a total of 24,010 men, women, boys and girls, or 144% of initially selected number of beneficiaries;

144% of initially selected beneficiaries reached to date

24,010 men, women, boys and girls reached

87 VSLAs ESTABLISHED WITH 66% OF WOMEN

Two monthly distributions of VFW vouchers for 1,200 households

On-going infrastructure rehabilitation of **75 sites**

Identification of **75 projects** for micro-entrepreneur support

Table 1. Award Level Beneficiaries

Total beneficiaries targeted	25 060 beneficiaries (3 580 households)
Total beneficiaries reached this quarter	36 036 beneficiaries ¹ (5 148 households)
Total cumulative number of beneficiaries reached	36 036 beneficiaries ¹ (5 148 households)

Sector #1 Agriculture & Food Security	Objective 1: Vulnerable households in Ansongo circle recover productive agricultural livelihoods
Beneficiaries Targeted	24 010 beneficiaries (3 430 households)
Beneficiaries Reached this quarter	19 649 beneficiaries ¹ (2 807 households)
Cumulative number of Beneficiaries Reached	19 649 beneficiaries ¹ (2 807 households)
Sector #2 Economic Recovery & Market Systems	Objective 2: Vulnerable households restore livelihoods and withstand economic shocks
Beneficiaries Targeted	12 250 beneficiaries (1 750 households)
Beneficiaries Reached this quarter	16 387 beneficiaries ¹ (2 341 households)
Cumulative number of Beneficiaries Reached	16 387 beneficiaries ¹ (2 341 households)

Please note: Total beneficiary numbers are a count of direct and indirect beneficiaries (household members) that also benefit from activities undertaken by direct beneficiaries.

¹Indirect beneficiaries are estimated due to average figures for household sizes.

2. Program Overview

In response to an extended period of conflict and drought in northern Mali, Mercy Corps designed the Irtoun program to enhance food security and economic recovery in Ansongo by strengthening agricultural production, helping vulnerable families protect their animal assets, and restoring livelihoods while building longer term economic resilience.

The objectives of the program are:

1. To help vulnerable households in the Ansongo circle recover productive agro-pastoral livelihoods, and
2. To allow vulnerable households to restore income-generating activities and withstand economic shocks.

Immediate food security needs are being addressed through food vouchers-for-work (VfW) as well as animal feed vouchers, acknowledging the importance of livestock as a food resource among agro-pastoral households in the region. Through a market-based approach, Irtoun also focuses on the recovery of market gardening activities, including the most important cash crops of the region, and on addressing the needs of pastoralists for improved fodder and health care services for their livestock. VfW projects support the recovery of livelihoods by helping communities to rehabilitate lands, irrigation schemes and agricultural infrastructure degraded during the conflict.

Additionally, Irtoun assists micro-entrepreneurs affected by insecurity through business training and a small cash injection to re-start their businesses. Finally, all Irtoun beneficiaries are encouraged to join community based village savings and loan associations (VSLA), which act as a form of safety net to strengthen recovery efforts, allowing participants to benefit from improved financial management and credit opportunities for community driven economic growth.

By intervening and supporting in key areas of agricultural and economic livelihood development, the Irtoun program is providing essential ingredients for communities to solidify a peaceful and productive future.

3. Contextual Update

During the reporting period, the overall situation in northern regions of Mali remained in a state of uncertainty, marked by continued attacks against MINUSMA forces, in Gao, Timbuktu and Kidal regions and car-jacking in Kidal and Timbuktu regions. The security situation remained calm in the circle of Ansongo, in spite of a few isolated cases of banditry during fairground market days. Mercy Corps continue to enforce strict security protocols in Gao and Ansongo, especially for staff movement with formal authorization and close monitoring of movement in program areas.

4. Performance Summary

Sector #1				
Agriculture & Food Security	Vulnerable households in Ansongo circle recover productive agricultural livelihoods			
Beneficiaries Targeted	24 010 beneficiaries (3 430 households)	Budget:	\$ 1,375,056	
Beneficiaries Reached	Reporting period: 19 649 beneficiaries ¹ (2 807 households)	Cumulative: 19 649 beneficiaries ¹ (2 807 households)		
Geographic Area(s)	Gao Region of Northern Mali, Ansongo circle; Bourra, Ouattagouna, Ansongo, Bara Communes			
Sub-Sector 1.1: Livestock				
INDICATORS	BASELINE	TARGET	PROGRESS	COMPLETION DATE
Indicator 1.1.1: Number of animals benefiting from or affected by livestock activities	0	2 000	2 000	September 2014
Indicator 1.1.2: Number of people benefiting from livestock activities, disaggregated by sex	Male: 0	490	797	September 2014
	Female: 0	0	203	September 2014
Sub-Sector 1.2 : Improving Agricultural Production				
INDICATORS	BASELINE	TARGET	PROGRESS	COMPLETION DATE
Indicator 1.2.1: Projected increase in number of months of food self-sufficiency due to distributed seed systems/agricultural inputs for beneficiary households ²	N/A	10 months	N/A	
Indicator 1.2.2. Number of people benefiting from seed systems/agricultural input activities, by sex	Male: 0	240	315	December 2014
	Female: 0	0	0	

Sector #2		Objective 2: Vulnerable households restore livelihoods and withstand economic shocks		
Economic Recovery & Market Systems				
Beneficiaries Targeted	12,250 beneficiaries (1,750 households)	Budget:	\$ 354,819	
Beneficiaries Reached	Reporting period: 16,387 beneficiaries ¹ (2,341 households)	Cumulative: 16,387 beneficiaries ¹ (2,341 households)		
Geographic Area(s)	Gao Region of Northern Mali, Ansongo circle; Boura, Ouattagouna, Ansongo, Bara Communes			
Sub-Sector 2.1: Livelihoods Restoration				
INDICATORS	BASELINE	TARGET	PROGRESS	COMPLETION DATE
Indicator 2.1.1: Number of people assisted through livelihoods restoration activities, disaggregated by sex	Male: 0	60	31	In progress
	Female: 0	90	44	In progress
Indicator 2.1.2: Percent of beneficiaries reporting their livelihoods restored within three to six months after receiving support	N/A	80%	N/A	
Indicator 2.1.3: Total USD amount channeled into the program area through sub-sector activities	\$0	\$15 000	\$5 142	In progress
Sub-Sector 2.2 : Microfinance				
INDICATORS	BASELINE	TARGET	PROGRESS	COMPLETION DATE
Indicator 2.2.1: Number of people, disaggregated by sex, or MSEs newly receiving financial services or continuing to receive financial services due to USAID/OFDA support systems/agricultural inputs for beneficiary households	Male: 0	600	770	In progress
	Female: 0	1 000	1 496	In progress
Indicator 2.2.2: Percentage of financial services accounts/groups supported by USAID/OFDA that are functioning properly	N/A	75%	N/A	

Please note: Total beneficiary numbers are a count of direct and indirect beneficiaries (household members) that also benefit from activities undertaken by direct beneficiaries.

¹ Indirect beneficiaries are estimated due to unknown figures for household sizes.

² The Months of Adequate Household Food Provisioning (MAHFP) measurement tool will be used for this indicator.

Sector Summary:

Sector #1: Agriculture & Food Security:

1.1 Livestock

1.1.1 Animal fodder vouchers for 1,000 vulnerable households.

Nothing to report this quarter.

1.1.2 Capacity building of herders to improve fodder harvesting and storage

During this quarter, the Irtoun program continued holding participatory awareness sessions and training on fodder harvesting for 180 pastoralists and agro pastoralists (including 36 women) in Bourra (Youni, Gassi, Gollingo, Lellehoye villages), Ansongo (Bazi-Gourma, Bazi-Haoussa, Ansongo villages) and Bara (Tanal) municipalities. During the previous quarter, program participants had requested Mercy Corps to continue awareness, information and training activities on fodder management throughout the entire campaign in order to better prepare communities for the lean seasons. These awareness campaigns were also held on VFW distribution sites (activity 1.2.2) which benefited an additional 1,200 persons. Radio messages in Sonhrai language on fodder harvesting and storage techniques were also broadcasted twice a week on a local radio called Radio Sony for three months, and are planned to continue throughout 2015.



Photo 1: Distribution and installation of solar refrigerators

1.1.3 Training and refresher training for 30 Community Animal Health Workers

During this quarter, Mercy Corps purchased and installed solar refrigerators to authorized veterinarians in Ansongo and Ouattagouna communes in order to improve the reliability of their supply chains. Veterinarians reported this equipment has been a key component of their work, enabling them to successfully undertake a vaccination campaign on contagious bovine pleuropneumonia in both communes.

1.2 Improving Agricultural Production

1.2.1 Voucher for Agricultural inputs for 1,200 farmers

During the reporting period, a total of 1,200 farmers were selected from 50 gardening groups and individual small holder farmers to receive seeds and agricultural inputs. Mercy Corps prepared vouchers and signed MoUs with local vendors. In total, 25 tons of potato seeds as well as okra, chili pepper, onions and tomato seeds have been distributed in the four selected communes. This also provided beneficiaries



Photo 2: Voucher for agricultural inputs

with a chance to have options of seeds to choose from based on the quality of seeds they prefer to plant during the season rather than the traditional “handout” approach to avail communities with seeds with no alternative to select from. Similarly, MoUs were signed with gardening groups’ representatives for the distribution of agricultural tools and equipment.

1.2.2 Training and support to 50 agricultural/gardening groups

Prior to planting distributed seeds, trainings and practical demonstrations on land preparation and planting and production techniques were conducted with seed recipients and gardening groups. These farmer trainings have multiplier effects as the knowledge trickles down to other farmers in the catchment area.



Photo 3: Preparation and & plantation of potato seeds in Ass Sourrir village, Bara Commune

1.2.3. Rehabilitation of agricultural infrastructure – Food Vouchers for Work

Food voucher for work (VfW) activities tapered off in October and were completed by the end the month as planned.

The majority of rehabilitated infrastructure was focused in areas susceptible to rapid floods from the river, in order to improve irrigation practices. To date, it is estimated that 27.74 kilometers of water infrastructure has been rehabilitated. Additionally, some cases of continued work remain around vegetable gardens supported by the project, such as in Koukia with gardening associations from Labbezanga. Additionally, two canals were deepened in Mozonga in order to drain the rising water and feed into vegetable gardens. These activities permit a large majority of smallholder farmers to quickly access river water that previously was not reaching the valley.

All planned embankment rehabilitation activities have been successfully completed. Once the embankment rehabilitation was completed, VfW workers assisted smallholder farmers on improving the layouts of their gardens. They provided manual labor on landscaping, donated recycled wooden planks and also helped to dig traditional canals. In total, forty-nine small gardens were rehabilitated thanks to Voucher for Work beneficiaries. The fiftieth garden planned is the Gouthine garden in the village of Bara, which at the time of the activities did not respond to vegetable production norms due to eucalyptus overgrowth, so this community decided to divide the land between individuals and rehabilitate the land in a piecemeal fashion

1.2.4. Revitalize 20 irrigation management committees

During this quarter, the Irtoun program started conducting an assessment of existing irrigation systems in coordination with local technical services for agriculture in order to determine priorities and management arrangements for irrigation perimeters in selected areas in Ansongo. The diagnosis focused on irrigation modalities, water exhaustion means, irrigation expenses, and organizational arrangement for resource mobilization. The results of this diagnosis expected by the end of January 2015 will inform priority actions to pursue for the irrigation management committees in Irtoun supported areas.

Sector #2: Economic Recovery & Market Systems

2.1. Support to 150 micro-entrepreneurs

This quarter, 75 small entrepreneurs (59% women) received training and 2 installments of 25,000 FCFA (\$50 USD) each. This amount constitutes the co-financing component towards procurement of additional inputs and/or operating expenses (e.g. rent, transport).

Selection and training of youth entrepreneurs

Young entrepreneur training took place in commune capitals, working with 75 entrepreneurs (44 of whom are women). Each youth (18-35) is individually sponsored and mentored by one community member, chosen within the community as a positive influence.



Photo 4 : Selected entrepreneur in Bazi Haoussa village, Ansongo Commune

Monitoring and formative supervision of youth entrepreneur activities

Before the cash installments were made, supervision of entrepreneurial activities was conducted in order to confirm that youth entrepreneurs were actively engaged in their appropriate and planned activities. Workshops were held in each commune in order to prepare youth for the cash installment transfers by explaining the transfer process, the role of the community mentor, the content of the protocol and other relevant conditions to the process. These workshops were also attended by representatives from the local youth service.

A protocol for the cash installment has been established for each beneficiary, containing the conditions for granting and managing funds. This protocol is signed by the various stakeholders: Mercy Corps, the beneficiary, his/her sponsor, the National Employment Agency (ANPE), the local youth service, and the mayor of the commune.

Cash installments to youth entrepreneurs

Cash transfers were conducted in two installments, each valued at 25,000 FCFA (approximately \$50 USD). This phased approach was chosen in order to gauge the motivation of beneficiaries and assure a proper use of the funds according to the youths' prepared business plans.

The second tranche is conditional to a performance check by the Mercy Corps team in order to confirm that beneficiaries are following their business plans and respecting the previously signed protocol, using the grants to support their entrepreneurship activities.

2.2. Establish/Strengthen 80 Village Savings and Loans Associations

During the reporting period, 87 VSLAs with a total of 2,266 beneficiaries (1,496 women and 770 men) in 9 villages in the communes of Ouattagouna, Bara and Ansongo have been formed and are fully functional. After successful mobilizing all groups, most of the focus during the reporting period has been on training VSLA groups (e.g., organizational lifecycle, elections/governance, policies, legal status) using a participatory approach and adapted to illiterate audiences. As part of the training exercise, group members drafted their constitutions, elected their leaders (Chairperson, Treasurer and Secretary), and agreed on the share value and loaning dynamics in relation to shared capital, repayment, and an optional social fund. Mercy Corps has provided all groups with VSLA materials (passbooks, cashbox and locks), and all have commenced savings.



Photo 5: Distribution of cash boxes to VSLA 'Gomny Bangai', Ansongo

5. Monitoring & Evaluation

Monitoring and evaluation activities during this quarter included:

- Post-distribution monitoring for livelihood activities, signaling high beneficiary satisfaction with voucher activities
- Market monitoring, assuring no drastic changes in markets due to vouchers
- Voucher distribution monitoring and quality assurance
- Monitoring and formative supervision for entrepreneurship activities
- Monitoring and facilitation of 87 VSLAs
- Preparation of accountability and community feedback assessments to put in place HAP¹-compliant accountability and complaint mechanisms

¹ Humanitarian Accountability Partnership

The Irtoun program also conducted a micro-finance study in coordination with partner PlaNet Finance in order to prepare year 2 planning and enhance micro-finance activities to improve resilient capacities in intervention areas. Reviewing the financial needs of households and small businesses will help identify financial needs in order to rehabilitate the capital of families through informal and/or trade finance. PlaNet Finance is an NGO established in Mali in 2009. Since then, it has developed an in-depth acknowledgement of all microfinance actors and a major expertise in capacity building for micro-entrepreneurs from the informal sector. Specifically, the study, as part of Irtoun's mid-term review, aimed at establishing a diagnosis of the current state of microfinance in the Ansongo district - from informal finance to trade finance - through an in-depth analysis of the supply and demand regarding financial services.

6. Coordination

The Irtoun program continued to work closely with local authorities at the commune and department levels, notably community leaders, decentralized collectivities, local technical service agents, and private vendors. During this quarter PU-AMI (*Première Urgence-Aide Médicale Internationale*) contacted the Mercy Corps team in Gao to introduce themselves and their ECHO-funded health program in approximately 4 health centers in Ansongo district. World Vision International also reached out to the Irtoun team to coordinate on an upcoming school canteens and food distribution program in certain communes in Gao and Ansongo.

Mercy Corps continues participating in regional coordination meetings in Gao (OCHA) and at national level, meetings organized by OCHA and the food security cluster.